

“All my life, I thought that men or the community were the reason behind the suppression of women; they were the ones holding us back. After attending NP’s awareness sessions and trainings, I realized that women had the power and the strength from the very beginning, all we needed was to believe in ourselves, and luckily, I did. If I never changed and believed in myself, my daughter would have been murdered in front of my eyes, and I wouldn’t have been able to do anything about it,” Fayza.¹

Those were the words of Fayza, an active member of one of the Women’s Peace Teams (WPTs) established, trained and supported by Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) in Zummar, Tel Afar District, Iraq. Fayza was forced to get married when she was 16 and had to drop out of school, despite being a bright student who always got high grades. All her life, Fayza felt that for women to live in peace, they must try to stay invisible, without an opinion, and serve their families and husbands.



WPT members receiving certificates after attending the UCP training (February 2022)

In May 2023, she reflected on the time she spent in trainings with NP and the actions she has taken to address the gender norms at the root of gender-based violence in her own family.

NP started working in Zummar in 2021, establishing WPTs who were trained in Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP), including nonviolent conflict resolution methods, leadership and advocacy. In doing so, NP aimed to strengthen the position of women and girls in their communities, driving sustainable change as women and youth become aware of their ability to be agents of peace. The WPT members were trained to mitigate violent threats and prevent and respond to protection concerns.

Looking back at the UCP trainings with NP, Fayza felt that her beliefs that women were second-class citizens were challenged, and so did her behaviour. Fayza explains that she was not just given more information about gender equality, nonviolent conflict resolution and addressing protection concerns within her community. She felt she was given an opportunity for the first time in her life to engage with other women in her community, creating a sense of belonging and feeling united and stronger as a group. Ultimately, this contributed to her confidence, and it was the starting point for Fayza to use her existing skills to prevent and address violence in her community:

“I got to know all the women in my area, and we became like one family. Since NP gave us the space to get to know and support each other. It was not only about the information we were taking but also about the feeling of empowerment and the sense of belonging that we felt; this was the time I felt the most powerful. Even after NP’s project ended, I kept feeling the same way, and that’s how I saved my daughter.”

In June-2022, NP’s project in Zummar ended, restarting in June of 2023. During this interval, the WPT that Fayza was part of did not stop preventing and responding to acts of violence, including addressing gender-based violence against

¹ Names have been changed to protect the identity of women involved.

women and girls. Through the UCP methods and particularly the leadership strategies gained, the WPT continued to raise awareness amongst girls and both male and female youth on GBV, nonviolent conflict resolution, reporting and addressing online blackmailing. The WPT also continued to advocate with the relevant duty bearers. It succeeded in getting the roads in Hai-Al-Ta'akhy to be constructed, in addition to including the most in-need families in receiving assistance and support from the municipality.

Personally, Fayza feels that the most important result of the knowledge and skills she gained was the difference she was able to make in her own family by addressing gender-based violence and preventing her daughter from being forcibly married, as she was herself when she was young.

In September 2022, Fayza's 16-year-old daughter was blackmailed by a man who wanted to sabotage her engagement with the man she loved. The blackmailer hacked into the girl's phone, edited personal pictures of her, and began spreading them online. When the girl's father, Fayza's husband, heard about this, he believed that his daughter was in a relationship with a man other than her fiancé and started brutally hitting her, intending to kill her for she brought shame to the family. Being trained by NP in nonviolent conflict resolution as well as in responding to gender-based violence, including digital extortion, Fayza managed to mediate the situation, preventing further violence from happening.

"This is when I started applying everything I learned from NP."

Fayza courageously faced him, helping him realise the harmful consequences of GBV and explaining that online blackmailing is a form of GBV as well as victim-blaming and hitting a 16-year-old girl. Eventually, he was convinced and stopped harming their daughter. However, the girl's fiancé did not believe her and decided to break off the engagement. Societal stigmatization of such situations puts girls like Fayza's daughter at immediate risk for violence and forced marriage by her family members. Fayza not only succeeded in

stopping the violence against her daughter, but also managed to convince the father not to marry off their daughter while she was underage or forcibly.

Fayza explained that this was a turning point in her relationship with her daughter and husband. It was the first time she faced her husband to address the power relations between men and women and GBV affecting her daughter and other women in the community. Fayza managed to stand up for her and her daughter's safety, wanting her to have a better life than she had. In doing so, Fayza feels that she has set an example for her daughter and others, symbolising that any woman can stand up for herself, resolve conflict without violence and that women are more than just wives:

"NP made me feel I am the person who has a say and can get to decide for my family. I started to believe in myself and believe that I am strong and capable of doing many things besides house chores. I want my daughter to have a better life and a better future than me. I want her to see if I can be strong; she can too."

Fayza is one of several WPT members preventing violence in their communities and addressing GBV and exclusion from decision-making step-by-step. Together with the community, NP will continue to identify and establish WPTs in the area, strengthening women's position and effective influence in decision-making and their capacity to prevent, mitigate and respond to violence.

